



## United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
Voyageurs National Park  
360 Highway 11 East  
International Falls, MN 56649



IN REPLY REFER TO:  
I.A.1 (Perm)

December 22, 2016

Erik Smith  
Minnesota Pollution Control Agency  
520 Lafayette Rd N.  
St. Paul, Minnesota 55155-4194

Re: Public notice for U.S. Steel Minntac tailings basin National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) / State Disposal System (SDS) Permit MN0057207

Dear Mr. Smith:

The National Park Service (NPS) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES)/State Disposal System (SDS) permit reissuance (MN0057207) for the U.S. Steel Corp Minntac Tailings Basin Area (facility) to construct and/or operate wastewater treatment facilities and to discharge into waters of the State of Minnesota.

Voyageurs National Park (NP) is a place of scenic landscapes and waterways, and is rich in human history. Located in sparsely populated northern Minnesota and sharing 55 miles of international border with Canada, the park's 218,000 acres is part of a larger ecosystem that includes the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCA) and Quetico Provincial Park. Voyageurs NP was legislated by Congress in 1971 and established in 1975, *"to preserve, for the inspiration and enjoyment of present and future generations, that outstanding scenery, geological conditions, and waterway system which constituted a part of that historic route of the Voyageurs who contributed significantly to the opening of the Northwestern United States."* The park contains waters that are designated by the State of Minnesota as Outstanding Resource Value Waters, for which new or expanded discharges to these waters are prohibited. The park is located downstream of the proposed permitted area and is concerned with protection of the water resources within its management area.

The U.S. Steel Corp Minntac Tailings Basin Area has been operating under an expired permit since 1992. During that time the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) and the facility have conducted studies that have revealed "significant seepage escaping the basin over its 8000+ acre footprint and that this seepage is causing exceedances of water quality standards in surface water and groundwater in a broad area surrounding the basin." A summary of conditions in the draft permit include surface water monitoring and toxicity testing; however, the facility has

failed to act on prior proposals to address basin water quality, despite violating the Schedule of Compliance as agreed upon with MPCA.

The National Park Service requests specific consideration of the following concerns with respect to issuing the proposed permit:

- The lakes of Voyageurs and the BWCA have been designated by the State of Minnesota as Outstanding Resource Value Waters. Subpart 9 of Statute 7050.0180 (Nondegradation for Outstanding Resource Value Waters) addresses impacts from upstream discharges:

Subpart 9 (Impacts from upstream discharges) states that “(t)he agency shall require new or expanded discharges to waters that flow into outstanding resource value waters be controlled so as to assure no deterioration in the quality of the downstream outstanding resource value water.”

- Modeling has shown potential impacts of proposed mining operations within this watershed on waters of Voyageurs National Park (Meyers, 2014/Rev. 2015) through contaminated groundwater discharge to surface waters, and the impacts of contaminated groundwater related to the proposed permit are unknown and are upstream of Voyageurs National Park.
- The lakes of Voyageurs National Park are 303d listed by the U.S. EPA for mercury impairment. Sulfate, one of the principal contaminants in the tailings pond water which would be released through the proposed permit, is important in the conversion of mercury to toxic and biologically-available methylmercury and is, at times, the limiting factor in that conversion. Thus, increased sulfate in the tributaries and waters leading to Voyageurs National Park could result in increased methylmercury concentrations in park lakes, which would exacerbate the current mercury impairment of these waters.
- The purpose of the additional evaluation in the NPDES permit is to identify feasible technologies to reduce the concentration of sulfate within the tailings basin to 800 mg/L within five years of permit issuance, and 357 mg/L within ten years from permit issuance, or in the shortest reasonable period of time. Sulfate targets should be lowered, as possible, to correspond with wild rice standards in review by MPCA.
- The potential impacts of a discharge from the Minntac tailings pond should be considered along with the potential impacts of other mining activities in the waters that drain toward Voyageurs NP. Contaminants originating from mining within the Rainy Lake and Namakan watersheds may flow through Voyageurs (Meyers, 2014/Rev. 2015) and cumulative impacts within the affected watershed need to be considered.
- The U.S. Department of Interior and Department of Agriculture recently (December 15, 2016) took actions that denied an application for renewal of two hard rock mineral leases in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, as well as initiated steps to withdraw key portions of the watershed from new mineral permits and leases. These actions are

indicative of the level of concern present regarding potential contamination of the area's water resources.

The NPS recommends development of a current NPDES/SDS permit for U.S. Steel Minntac facility. We believe this should be an effective tool for water quality improvement at the facility if the permit adheres to strict targets and definitive timeline for bringing discharge waters into compliance with all applicable standards for receiving waters.

We appreciate your consideration of our comments. If you have questions or would like to request additional information, you may contact me at 218-283-6674 or [mary\\_graves@nps.gov](mailto:mary_graves@nps.gov).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mary Graves".

Mary Graves  
Acting Superintendent

Attachment:

Technical Memorandum: Potential Metals Mining and the Voyageurs National Park Risk Assessment for Upstream Metals Mining Prepared for: Voyageurs National Park Association, Minneapolis MN National Parks Conservation Association, Washington DC By: Tom Myers, Ph.D.; Hydrologic Consultant, Reno, NV October 30, 2014; Revisions January 8, 2015